

SHARING BOOKS AND STORIES: BOOK CLUBS THAT BOOK TALK

by Kristina McGlaun



"When does the book club start?" a student asks as he passes me in the hall. "It begins during Teen Read Week in October," I reply. He replies, "Aww...that long?"

I get this almost every day throughout September. I have often thought of changing the beginning date for my book club, but then it fits in so well with the purpose of the American Library Association's Teen Read Week which occurs in October (American Library Association [ALA], 2006).

According to Book Group Corner (n.d.), book club meetings have taken place since 1878. Adults, young adults, and children all love to talk about the book they have just read. Jacobsohn (1998) asserts, "A good group goes well beyond improving comprehension or appreciation of a book" (p.12). A good reading group promotes a sense of self-awareness and community in its members and the group allows a reader to let the story live a little longer by sharing it with someone else. But it also offers readers insight into what else is out there to read. With over 100,000 new titles and editions published every year (Teague, 2006), a person needs all the help he or she can get in choosing the next book to read.

The Jackson Creek Middle School book club was born from this premise. When Harry Potter first flew to the top of the best sellers' list and before he flew a second time, students would ask what they could read that was like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. The usual good fantasy authors were suggested: Lois Lowry, Madeline L'Engle, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Ursula LeGuin. With my list of recommendations dwindling and the interest in Harry Potter growing, I decided that Harry Potter would be a wonderful way to get students to talk about books they are reading and maybe even suggest to me and to other students some good books to read. A book club would also be a way for the library to address some of the Language Arts/ English standards stressed by the Indiana Department of Education (2001).

There were some concerns that needed to be considered before the first book club meeting. After

getting permission to establish a book club from the principal, I began to read through the various printed and online literature about organizing and managing a book club. Teenreads.com (1993), Book Browse (n.d.), Book Group Corner (n.d.), and Jacobsohn (1994) offer suggestions in membership, publicity, organization, resources, and more.

It was clear that the book club should be open to all students at the school since it was important that all students who wanted to join were able to participate. Daily announcements, posted signs, and informational visits to classrooms were all actively used to promote the book club. Eight eighth grade students and six seventh grade students joined the club in 2000. For a school with 600 students I thought I had failed, but Teenreads.com (1993), Book Browse (n.d.), and Book Group Corner (n.d.) say that a small group of twelve or less participants is best for a book club. Although the size of the groups fluctuated between six and twenty-five students, it soon became clear that a maximum group size of twelve students was ideal. When the groups have become too large, I have added additional groups. Most of the years, the number of girls outnumber the boys, but a boy or two will usually participate, too.

Organizational tips from the literature (Jacobsohn 1998; Book Group Corner n.d.; Teenreads.com 1993; Book Browse n.d.) helped with the many logistical problems, such as where to have the meeting, when to have the meeting, group management and discussion, and book selection. Where to have the book club meet was easy...the obvious choice was the library. As the group expanded and students began to bring in cafeteria meals on trays, the carpet in the library became a concern. After the first year of worrying about food and liquid damage to the carpet, I decided to move the meeting to a classroom with tiled floors.

When the group would meet was another problem that was easily solved. Since I wanted any student interested in joining to be able to attend, I knew I could not limit the club to meeting only before or after school. Many students at Jackson Creek Middle School ride buses to and from school, and to host the club

only before or after school would limit it to students whose parents could drive them and also would eliminate those students involved in other after school activities. The club needed to meet at a time during the school day when all students would be able to attend. Lunch time became the obvious choice. Thirty minutes seemed short but overall acceptable if the group met every week. By meeting every week, students would be less likely to forget to attend the meetings. Wednesday proved a good meeting day because it offered enough time to remind students during the week that the book club was meeting. ALA's Teen Read Week in October became the perfect time to start off the club with a pizza party. ALA (2006) designed the week to remind students to read for the fun of it. It seemed a wonderful idea to connect the two activities.

A student-managed club was the original plan, but after the first year I realized that a student-managed club still needs a sponsor to sort out problems. Since the club has no president, everyone who joins is equal, but every member agrees to respect one another, to listen to each other, and to attend every meeting. Decisions are made by the group. As the sponsor, I facilitate the beginning of the meetings, keep attendance, and try to remind members of the three rules, but for the most part students govern themselves. I try to be as equal as the other members, although I do step out of this role sometimes when reminding students of such things as needing to at least know the title of the book and the characters' names. I also encourage students to ask questions and initiate discussions about the storyline. For the most part, members encourage one another to share and reprimand one another when any of the rules are broken.

Reading is a great incentive for some students to attend, but in reality something else is needed to catch the attention of others. I decided to host a pizza party once a month for club members. Members agreed that any member who is obviously only attending during pizza week will be asked to consider why they are members of the club.

In the beginning, students decided what books to read. The plan was to hold two meetings for each book and have the student who suggested the book lead the discussion. Either the student or I would supply author information or book guides to the rest of the members. Several problems arose with this plan. During the first year the students suggested their favorites which happen to be rather lengthy books such as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein, *Einstein's Bridge* by John Cramer, and *Fellowship of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. The school was still new and there were neither multiple copies nor individual copies of many of the titles. Students would need to locate copies of the books for themselves. Based on the students'

suggestions, some of the titles were purchased for the library; however, having enough copies remained a problem.

The next major problem was that students were not always prepared for discussion. The first book, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin A. Abbott, went well with more than half of the members reading the book, but, as the weeks passed and the length of the books increased, fewer students were reading the suggested books. Also in some cases, the boys in the club decided to not read some of the books that appeared to be written for a female audience, such as *Alanna: The First Adventure* by Tamora Pierce. Finally, only the student who had suggested the book and I were reading the book. It was clear that with class assigned reading, other classroom assignments, and after school activities, it was difficult for students to read a book that did not appeal to them.

With this major problem needing to be addressed, I went back to why I started the book club. The book club was a way for students to share what they were reading. It was a place where I could also get ideas of books to purchase for the library and to suggest to other students. One day as I was book talking to a class about various books, I realized that book club members could share books with each other. Members could book talk the various books they have read. Jaeger and Demetriadis (2002) used a similar format when financial problems limited their implementation of a book club. With this new format, students would not need to locate or read a chosen book. Instead, they would learn about a book from someone who had read it and then they could decide whether or not they wanted to read the book, too. According to Shader (2002) and Jacobsohn (1994), adding structure to book clubs also builds cohesion in the group. I suggested to the group that every two weeks the reading should be structured around a different genre: mystery, historical fiction, fantasy, etc.

At the beginning of the year, students have a choice as to how the club should be structured. Option A is a traditional book club structure in which all members read the same book and discuss the book together. Option B is the new format in which members will book talk or share books they have read with one another. Option C is any other structure anybody wants to suggest. After open discussions and a vote, option B or the new format is usually chosen. I also create handouts that discuss the different types of genres, lists of titles by genres as suggestions for the students, and guidelines on how to present a book talk.

During each book talk, I take notes as the students share their books. From my notes, I create questions from the books the students have presented. I try to organize the questions around structural features of

literature and narrative analysis of the text. I then host a mini trivia game during the monthly pizza party. Students try to answer the questions based on what they have heard during the discussion.

Every year finds more and more students joining the book club. As with the mystery book club organized by Shader (2002), students “who may not ordinarily be interested in traditional book discussion groups to read and talk about books” (p.37) have been joining the book club. Last year I had three groups with a total of twenty-eight eighth graders and twelve seventh graders. The book club has offered an avenue to tap into new and popular titles that are purchased for the library through the recommendation of the book club members. As members discuss books they have read in previous grades, in current classes, and are of interest to them, I pass on their suggestions and plot summaries to other students who are always looking for the next “good book.”

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